

AN ELDER'S VIEW OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

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This paper is an interview between Carrielynn Lund and Cree Elder Ruth Gladue on research and community resilience in her semi-remote, northern Alberta community. Ruth is a Cree Elder born “during the war years.” She is married and has two girls, one boy, and “a few grandchildren.” Ruth has worked as a Community Health Representative (CHR) and Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) for over forty years. She lives in a semi-remote First Nations community in northern Alberta.



ONE ELDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Do I remember a time when my community was healthy? I'd have to go back to when I was young and I can only go by what I grew up with. There was no drinking. My parents didn't drink, my grandparents didn't drink.

We were poor, but everyone got along. At hunting time when someone killed something a little bit of it went to each of the families. I saw that growing up. The women, my mother and my grandmother, they all worked hard. We didn't have much of anything as children, but we all had fun, we made our own fun.

Mind you, there was work. Each one of us had to do work but to me that was a real healthy community, the non-drinking, the sharing, the caring. I don't remember, I didn't even know what the words jealousy or envy were back then because I didn't see it. We were all in the same situation. Nobody had more than the other families so that is why I would say we were in a healthy community.

It eventually changed because, along the way, we got more money and more access to money. The Government of Canada, INAC [Indian and Northern Affairs Canada], started giving us more control of the money. I was already growing up. I started seeing the envy, the jealousy, and the gossip. Later, in the seventies, it still wasn't too bad but the envy, certainly, and the jealousy was already there.

The drinking started about the sixties and it was my generation that started drinking, even though we didn't see it at home or at my grandparents' house. We'd go to town and we met friends. I'm not saying they forced us to drink, but we had to be like the other people, like our new friends, and that's when a lot of people started drinking.

When the trouble really started was because of the money. We had gas on our reserve, so we started getting more and more money, and of course the jealousy and the envy got worse. Everyone wanted a new house and jobs. Council were the ones who decided who got the jobs and the houses so everybody wanted to be a leader.

We really got into the money sometime around 1993 or 1994 when we were granted a great big settlement. Along with that money each individual got \$25,000 for 3 years.

The first year we got money was really bad because people were starting to do cocaine and when that money wasn't available anymore, these people were hooked.

I get along with everyone and try talking to people to stop their unhealthy ways. If someone doesn't want to talk to me I'll continue anyway. The jealousy has certainly gotten worse! It's not a happy community now, far from it. I try to be a good role model by not passing on gossip. I think that's the best way to do it. Hopefully others will do the same.

There's the drinking and the drugs. It's not only cocaine, there's marijuana, Crystal Meth, and Ecstasy, and others. Now they are breaking into homes and vehicles nightly to feed their addictions. Right now the challenge is to somehow get rid of the drug dealers in our community. We should be concentrating on getting rid of the addiction from the people that are addicted. One idea may be to have a community treatment centre, because I'm not even sure how many people I am talking about being addicted. It seems to be a high number and if we can bring the treatment to the community these drug dealers would have no customers. Addressing the addictions is the way to go because we can get rid of the drug dealers but there would be others because the demand would still be there. The drug dealers are local people. They are a brother, a cousin. They are all ages from youth to seniors.

There are a lot of people who are not users of alcohol or drugs, and that's a big strength. I've talked to people in my community who don't drink or do drugs and they don't like what's happening but we're at a loss to know what to do about it. I actually called one of the young ladies to set up a meeting for next week because I told her we have to do something. My greatest fear is that they might hurt someone, these people that are drinking and doing drugs.

Another strength is there are no organized gangs in our community, touch wood, so that I think is a big plus.

There is a big difference between the people who live on-reserve and those who don't. I see it in my own family. I have two nieces and a nephew that live in Grande Prairie. All three of them are doing well. They have bought their own homes. The older girl of the two nieces I have turned to religion that saved her from a life of drinking and doing drugs. She actually married the pastor of their church and they are doing really well.

The other ones are doing well because they learned what it takes to get ahead so they have no time for anything else, especially drinking and doing drugs. They learned the reality of living in the "real" world. It's not as easy because at home we don't have to pay rent, we don't pay for our heating gas,

for water, for sewer, or for garbage pick up. We live really well in my community but it's hard to get ahead because the jobs are limited.

For those who stay here, they either drop out of school or finish school and then do nothing. There's no motivation to get ahead because there aren't enough jobs, and for those who have dropped out there isn't anything they can really do without training.

As for things to do in the community for our kids, we have a beautiful indoor heated arena so there are a lot of our kids in hockey. They have hockey school in the summer and some of them play ball. For the others, there are lots and lots of toys out there — snowmobiles and quads — but it's not good because lots of kids are getting hurt. There are also video games and electronic things. Other than that there isn't much for the kids to do.

We also have a Bible study which is called culture study once a week. We don't have any church. A lot of people are so down on Roman Catholic, that's why we have to say Bible is a culture. The leadership doesn't want any western religion brought in. It is still there but there is also traditional stuff that has to be taught in that.

We had a few, my mother included, who went to residential school. Even though she was only there for two years it was enough to do damage. My siblings went to a Catholic school where they got treated just as bad as the ones that went to residential school. A lot of these people are leadership and in leadership families so that really turned them off the Roman Catholic religion. I am not sure if it's against all western religion they're against, or just, I think specifically Roman Catholic. The Native worker leads the Bible study and she has a lady from Beaverlodge who's Roman Catholic but she is not a nun, she's a housewife to help. It's usually kids who attend. I'd say about ten every week, they really look forward to it. They have it after school.

Looking ahead at the things I'd like to change, for sure are the drug use. I'd like to see that eliminated. I'd like to see the jealousy and envy out there stop and the third one would be to have healthy children. A person would have to work with the mothers and the young people, and teach them the value of nutrition and having a healthy lifestyle. They would need to know about not doing drugs while they are pregnant. Again, be a role model to the young people. Give them the information about the result of alcohol and that it is still the leading culprit in these babies because it has a life time effect.

I have been working with the maternal and child health program in my community since May. But even though I get along with all the young moms, they have a fear of me because they know I know they are doing drugs. I don't work with Child Welfare but they have an office in my building so a lot of them are saying we are working together. We could be, like if I were to see something that was going to hurt a child, of course I would report it, but I am not there to spy on them. I'm there to help them have healthier lifestyles when they are pregnant so they have healthier babies.

It's hard on me and sometimes I want to give up. It takes a lot of prayer — a lot of prayer. I pray sometimes when I hear people partying at night, because I live in the town site, and I pray to the Creator that these people are taken care of even if they are drugging or drinking, I guess it's especially when they need prayers. So that's where I get my strength and then I usually wake up in the morning and I have fresh hope.

I talk to the Creator and I was raised Roman Catholic. I still go to church once in awhile. But my preference is my own Native spirituality. We have ceremonies. I have a nephew and a cousin who run the White Spirit ceremony. I can't teach the young mothers about spirituality and ceremonies because my work says I am not able to talk about religion and politics. If they ask me a specific question then yes I would answer it as best as I could. I would never try to say you should go to this or that but I would be honest in my answers.

Years ago when someone was doing research on alcoholism I answered some questions. I was in denial and just said there's no problem here. It took me a few years to realize what a foolish way to answer those questions because I was in denial. I wanted everybody to think that my community was really healthy and it wasn't. I never heard back what the findings were.

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO AIDS AND RELATED DISEASES (ACRA)

It's hard to try and talk to people about AIDS and anything about sex but we have to do it. This research is important because it will help us know what we need to do to help keep our children from getting sick and dying. It's good to have the Elders on an advisory committee. I can only answer for myself because I have been in the health field; I know what disease can do. I see my role as helping as much as I can in the research program by advising how we do things in our community and talking to people about it.

I know the First Nations communities HIV rates, STI rates are rising. We lost another one through HIV/AIDS. I'm not sure, there's probably quite a few with the virus and unless they choose to share I'll never know how many, no one will ever know. People knew that person died of AIDS. No one knows for sure what the rate of AIDS is in our community but given the number of STIs that I hear of there has to be one or two or more. And given the pregnancies that are occurring that tells me they are not using condoms.

I suppose my background in nursing [LPN] helped me get to where I am today. If I didn't have that it probably would have been the same for me. In my parent's home, mom had babies every year but sex was never discussed.

I think having people from our community trained to do the research is better because they get more response. It depends on the individual you hire because there are certain individuals that wouldn't even be looked at, or their questions wouldn't be answered. They have to be respected and trusted by the community.

My real concern is for those [children] who are getting big. Those are the ones that I would like to see stay healthy. Prevention at an early age is very important!